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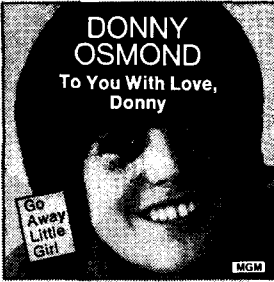
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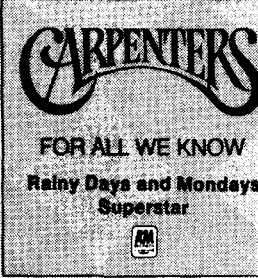
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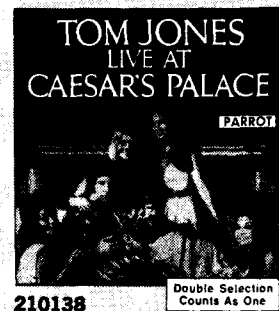
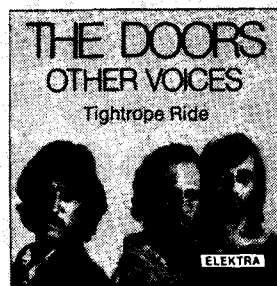
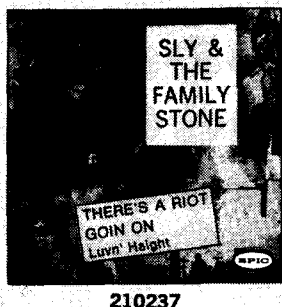
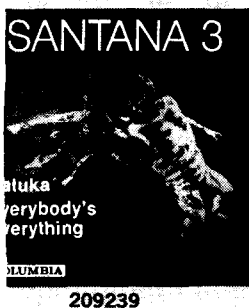
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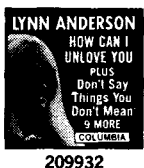
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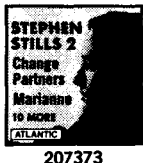
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Vietnam and the Elections: Old Myths and New Realities

"Our whole political experience has taught us: keep your distance from the central institutions of American life. . . . The characteristic fear of the '60s, the catchword of political menace: Cooption. And the inverse of the political menace was the political strategy: dissociation, abstention, boycott. But if we have nothing to offer, we have nothing to withhold. . . . The New Left has not been coopted, but it has nearly disappeared."

WHEN THE DEMAND FOR U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam was first taken up by the radical anti-war movement almost ten years ago, the liberal doves denounced it as simplistic, divisive and utopian. Today there is not a politician in sight who does not pay lip service to withdrawal. President Nixon, who has dropped more tons of bombs on Viet-

nam in three years of winding down the war than President Johnson did in five years of escalating it, included U.S. withdrawal in his "generous offer" of January 25. The President, of course far too generous to offer withdrawal alone, offered Withdrawal Plus Democracy. As Noam Chomsky shows in the accompanying article [page 12], Nixon's "Democracy" is a program for the surrender of the Vietnamese revolution to the Saigon army and police.

The demand for withdrawal can be distorted. Politicians can use it as cover for a continuing involvement that they cannot openly defend. Still, in this election, for the first time the radical movement has established the terms of the Vietnam debate; our demand is now the test of what the politicians can acknowledge and what they must conceal. They have been compelled to talk withdrawal. The question is whether they can be forced to mean it. Will there be peace, or another "settlement" as in 1954?

American political leaders will attempt to quiet popular opposition by phasing out the most overt instruments of U.S. intervention while maintaining effective U.S. domination over Vietnam. Ever since we brought Ngo Dinh Diem out of his retirement in the Maryknoll seminary in New Jersey and made him Premier of South Vietnam, we have hoped to make the successive Saigon client governments do our work for us in Vietnam. Now this policy is being pursued with new optimism. Years of saturation bombing, of unrelenting carnage, have weakened the fabric of Vietnamese society, and taken their toll of the indigenous forces of Vietnamese nationalism represented by the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG). Ten years ago Vietnam's population was 85 percent rural; today it is 45 percent. Large-scale U.S. investment programs are in progress to strengthen the Saigon government's material base, and ambitious plans for "post-war development" indicate that America's economic potentates are not counting on defeat. They hope to build up a foreign-dominated economy that will give the Saigon government enough social weight to dominate the political future of Vietnam.

That continued dominance is the key to U.S. strategy in Vietnam. To achieve it, everything else—from the presence of uniformed U.S. personnel, to the individual welfare of President Thieu—is dispensable.

So, for example, in February Edmund Muskie proposed the withdrawal of American soldiers, sailors, and airmen from all of Indochina. That is all to the good. But his second point (for which he may even be prepared to use U.S. aid as leverage) is "to urge the government in Saigon to make a political accommodation with all the elements of their society." What this means is to force the Saigon government to broaden its base, by including even the Vietcong. Revealed in this proposal is the hope that the Saigon government will be so strong, the revolutionary forces of Vietnamese nationalism so battered, and the U.S. anti-war movement so gullible, that the PRG can be forced into the role of junior partner in a coalition government.

By contrast, the radical demand for withdrawal must be not to broaden the Saigon government's base but to pull the rug out from under it, precisely to deprive it of its foreign supplied power in the internal politics of Vietnam. By the time a new President can take office next January, the U.S. will have handed over to Saigon a massive war machine, along with huge reserves and supplies, all defined by Nixon as "Vietnamese" and therefore immune to withdrawal. Uniformed American ground forces are being pulled out anyway. Our direct military leverage is air power. What does it mean to "withdraw" air power? We have fast-moving aircraft carriers, and long-range B-52 bombers. Our promises of bombing halts have proved worthless. As long as the Saigon government stands—Thieu or no Thieu—the implicit threat of U.S. air power stands behind it.

At a minimum we must demand an unconditional end to all aid to the Saigon government, both military aid and economic. In this situation there is no distinction; our economic aid in effect finances our mercenary army. (Any "humanitarian" exceptions such as an imported rice dole must be funnelled through an international



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Of course there is no guarantee that any promise wrested from a candidate will be performed when he is elected. Far from it. But building a popular mandate, clarifying the issue, pinning the candidates down to an unequivocal commitment—all this is an important political process. It is sometimes even enough to “keep the politicians honest.” It is certainly not wasted when the promise is broken. The sharpened consciousness of the issue, combined with the outrage of betrayal, form a potent basis for future direct action and mass struggle. Even Lyndon Johnson’s Vietnam peace mandate of 1964, such as it was, was important to the rise of the anti-war movement. It is all the more important now to sharpen the demand for withdrawal and establish the clearest possible mandate for it. More specifically, in this election year radicals must ask themselves how pressure can be brought to bear on the political contests to force the issue of real withdrawal in a way the politicians cannot evade.

WHILE MANY RADICALS WILL agree with this analysis of the withdrawal issue, many will not respond to the call for engagement at the electoral level that the logic of the struggle would seem to entail. According to the established political principles of the New Left, this is the kind of political contribution radicals are not supposed to make. By the canons of our conventional wisdom, radicals are barred from the main electoral arena. This belief is so pervasive on the left and so significant an obstacle to reviving the anti-war struggle and carrying it through to success, that it merits a full-scale discussion in itself.

The arguments against electoral involvement are familiar: electoral politics are a seductive delusion, a charade, a diversion of energies, a trap. There is truth in all of them. We have all seen dissenters hooked on “the art of the possible” by the Democratic Party. But we must realize that these days, amidst the remnants of our movement, the old epithets have a hollow ring. “A diversion of energies?” If only there were energies to divert.

The anti-electoral orientation of the

New Left was supposed to encourage serious organizing and lead to long-term continuity. It didn’t work out that way. Obviously something went wrong with the political approach that we developed. It has left us weak in spite of an increasing potential for radical strength, and now it bars us from intervening in the area of our greatest achievement and most profound responsibility. How can we *not* engage ourselves in this process in which the fate of Vietnam is now unfolding? Yet everything in our origins and in the dynamics of our growth teaches us to keep away.

The New Left emerged in reaction to the stultifying cold war consensus of the ’50s. Our original self-definition as a political movement came from our opposition to the liberals and the

“There is a danger not only of being absorbed into existing political life but also of losing contact with it, and with the people we are trying to reach.”

nominal socialists, who were immobilized by absorption, conformity and compromise. Dissociation from this mainstream was an intensely radicalizing principal. The cold war ruling consensus was profoundly vulnerable because it was wildly out of line with the developing world reality. The picture of America as the Affluent Society and the altruistic defender of Democracy was to confront a decade of war in Vietnam and a crisis of race and poverty at home. In such conditions the mere articulation of principled dissent was devastating, like the child’s observation that, as one could plainly see, the Emperor was bare.

The formative experience of the New Left was in the brilliant achievements of the anti-war movement, in the steady vindication of its uncompromising vision on Vietnam. Each escalating departure from the mainstream brought new success: from letters to Congressmen, to petitions, to marches, civil disobedience, draft

resistance, militant street confrontations, from “Negotiations Now” to “Immediate Withdrawal”; from fifteen thousand on the first Vietnam Day to demonstrations of more than a million. Until recently it seemed that the only danger was the backsliders, the compromisers, and they were consistently discredited.

As the ’60s ended, this linear progression stopped working. The superior force of our vision of the Vietnam War was no longer so clear for everyone to see. Nixon was pulling out, the draft slowed, the casualty rate declined. And when progressive escalation of our tactics was taken to its logical conclusion by the Weathermen—“the heavier the better”—it led to disaster, confusion and disarray.

The movement of the ’60s has not responded well to failure. We have not been equal to the sonorous portent of the question Lenin posed, “What Is To Be Done?” For us the question is more like, “What To Do?”

Our whole political experience has taught us: keep your distance from the central institutions of American life; they will enmesh the leaders in compromise, and seduce the followers with reforms. The characteristic fear of the ’60s, the catchword of political menace: Cooption. And the inverse of the political menace was the political strategy: dissociation, abstention, boycott.

But if we have nothing to offer, we have nothing to withhold. We have tried to elevate the boycott into a total political program. We have boycotted everything from non-union grapes to Presidential elections. No institution can escape. We are absent everywhere. (What are you doing today? “I think I’ll stay home and boycott the A&P.” All day? “No just until it closes.”)

Our vigilance was flawless, but one-sided; the New Left has not been coopted, but it has nearly disappeared.

IT IS TIME WE STARTED to learn what the experience of the ’60s didn’t teach us. We never faced the problem of formulating a program and making ourselves understood; we drew attention to the facts, and the facts spoke for themselves. We never really faced the problems of organiza-

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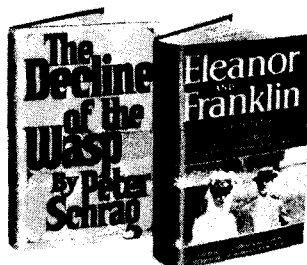
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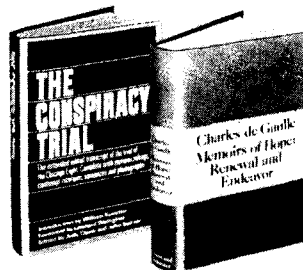
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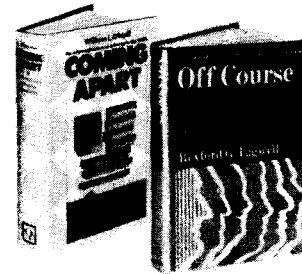
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tion; each "action" recreated the constituency of the movement. But the most critical lesson, in our state of fragmented isolation, is that there is a danger not only of being absorbed into existing political life but also of losing contact with it, and with the people we are trying to reach.

When radicals consider participation in the American electoral system, it is not out of admiration for its workings. No one questions the fundamental critique: the electoral system is rigged; the alternatives are imposed from above (rather blatantly if necessary as with Humphrey in 1968); candidates are not accountable to their supporters, and eventual betrayal can practically be assumed; the formal equality of the vote is far outweighed by the potent inequality of wealth, in the election itself (campaign funds, etc.), in the control of information, the shaping of ideology, and the control of the governmental structures into which the winning candidates are sent; the Democratic Party bears prime responsibility for the war, it is bound to the same ultimate interests as the Republicans, and it cannot be reformed; the whole is a system that provides the illusion of democracy without the substance.

But what strategic conclusions should we draw from these facts? A fairly typical example from a New Left argument against participation in the 1968 elections follows up a critique of the electoral system by calling for a general "deobfuscation of the existing reality." "That deobfuscation leads to a disengagement from existing institutions and value system, once people are aware of the manipulative nature of American corporate control . . . they must reject the rewards and demands of that society in order to clear the ground for a new conception of society." Even taken out of context such a statement is revealing. The notion that we can "clear the ground" by "disengagement from existing institutions" could seem plausible only to people rather marginally involved in those institutions in the first place: for example, middle-class students relying on parental support. Workers who rely on their "engagement with existing institutions" to live and eat might not find it so convenient to "reject the rewards."

A prime problem of revolution is precisely that the society lives by the institutions which must be transformed or overthrown. If only they really *were* just charades, everything would be much simpler. And radicals sometimes get so high minded and detached that they substitute this wish for the reality. The above-quoted analysis says "radicalization leads to an understanding that voting has nothing to do with changing your life." In that case, there would be no "rewards" to reject. It is not so much the illusion of power in electoral politics that radicals find dangerous, but the real influence it affords.

The radical notion of the "seductive illusions" of the electoral process is very much overstated. It acts as cover for the fact that radicals think people act like morons when they vote, whereas in fact people vote pretty rationally.

That doesn't mean they clearly perceive the limits of the system, but that within those limits they tend to use their votes to their best advantage. A program for radical independent politics has to start by recognizing that it is rational to vote, and generally speaking it is rational to vote for the "lesser evil." And when people fail to take the radicals' advice in their voting, it is generally not because they have been blinded by false consciousness, but because the radicals' advice doesn't make much sense.

The idea of the mesmerized voter leads to a kind of Pavlovian school of independent politics. Pavlovians believe that people vote for Democrats because of a compulsive habit that blocks any alternative. The solution is somehow to induce people to vote for a third party candidate; this is an intrinsically liberating act. They have broken through the block. And then having broken the Democratic habit, they start to become conditioned to third party voting.

Now in its worst form this leads radicals to induce that first habit-breaking vote by making the patently false "tweedledee tweedledum" argument, that the liberal and conservative candidates are indistinguishable, so there is nothing to lose from voting third party. Of course when the conservative like Reagan wins, the voter can see it does make a difference, that the radical steered him wrong, and the voter very

sensibly rejects any further guidance. There are even radicals who think a Reagan "radicalizes" people, makes them hate the system, but in fact people blame their troubles on Reagan, not the system, and they pine for a Democrat.

The more respectable Pavlovians make a more reasonable argument: that there are differences between the candidates, but they are smaller than they are made out to be; the Democrat may be better but he is still pretty bad, and we'd be much better off with a party of our own, which would present the radical alternative that we really need; finally, to help build this, it is worth risking the somewhat greater evil of Republicanism.

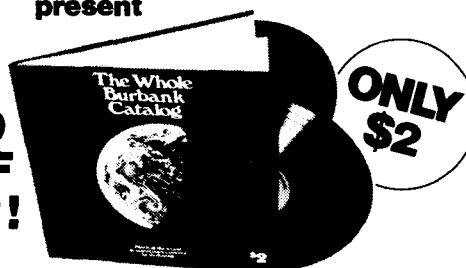
Now this makes good sense if the votes really help build a serious party. But when the number of voters in the third party is ridiculously small, it doesn't build, it just gets smaller. The Pavlovians believe it will start small and gradually grow, because they think that once you've voted independent you get the independence habit, you're hooked. In reality people don't see how their vote is building a real party, how the vote they are throwing into the third party to win say one percent of the votes cast is going to convince anyone else that it is a hot prospect. So they go back to the Democrats for good reason, while the radicals scratch their heads.

Building an independent radical electoral party, as one face of a radical movement whose concerns and strategies extend beyond elections, is a goal of prime importance. Too often, however, our attempts at independent politics simply teach people that, if they are powerless with the Democrats, they are even more powerless with us. We have been asking people to choose between their present political influence, which we minimize or ignore, and a future power we don't know how to build.

Once again the fear of cooption makes it hard to see our way clear of this dilemma. We tend to see every gain people make in the system as a cooptive threat, which strengthens their illusions and keeps them in line. Some radicals have the sense that the perfect radicalizing experience occurs when you get people together to demand something and they fail. If they do get

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what they ask for, there is the danger of cooption. In reality, failure has very limited utility, and what it does have is mostly for middle-class college students, who are shocked to discover that the social institutions are not designed to meet people's reasonable demands. But once or twice is enough to convince most people. After that, failure merely instills despair.

When people organize and win, they have themselves to thank, not the system, and generally they know it. And the concession, far from coopting them, makes them feel their collective power, encourages them to try for more, and encourages others to imitate and join them.

It is a mistake in the first place to think that the social system sustains itself primarily by cooption. This is rather like the liberal pluralist view of society as a number of consciously active interest groups, whose pursuit of their interests lead to a balanced resolution of the issues of power. Actually, cooption is something of an emergency measure, conceding to an especially troublesome group a share of the limited resources of privilege. It is in the nature of privilege that there is not enough to go around. (Of course, a concession is only cooptive if it quiets the source of the trouble rather than, say, encourages militancy.) Privileged rule is maintained not primarily by keeping people satisfied, but by keeping them apathetic, atomized, misinformed, above all isolated and passive.

These immobilizing influences are also our real enemies on the Left. We guard against cooption, but these have laid us low. We worry about illusions, but our real problem is despair; we have become disillusioned not only with the system but with ourselves. We are fragmented, not because we had an organization and lost it but because we have lost the easy trust and confidence in each other, the good faith in our leaders, and the simple consensus of issues and tactics which we substituted for organization. Now the issues and tactics have become more complicated. No doubt many of the leaders were irresponsible. Certainly the Weather-people did great damage. There was no Left authority to reject them so they were accepted at their word; they were the revolutionaries, and the people re-

jected the revolution. And our experience of independent electoral politics didn't help; it taught not collective power but collective impotence.

OUR FIRST PROBLEM on the Left is to shake off the feeling of failure by confronting our own success. To get rid of the idea that the movement "gave up" because it was exhausted by wasted effort, the idea that "nothing worked." The extraordinary achievements of the New Left of the '60s belie this notion. We have been instrumental in a transformation of American politics unimaginable in the "I like Ike" era of a dozen years ago. As politics have shifted, the system has materially weakened. Even the Army, sorely disaffected, is not an unquestioning instrument. The resources and options of imperialism have been sharply curtailed. The most timid reforms in Guatemala and the Dominican Republic once brought down immediate direct intervention. The sweeping nationalizations in Chile, whatever the eventual developments may be, already have demonstrated that U.S. freedom of action has been significantly reduced.

Vietnam is one of the issues about which people sometimes say "nothing worked." But in fact popular opposition played a decisive role in limiting U.S. options of escalation and massive troop presence. While the government wished to discourage us by pretending publicly to be unmoved by protest, the internal memoranda in the Pentagon Papers time and again point to popular protest as a major obstacle to military policy.

There have been no recent successes to restore confidence in the system. The war has not been won, and the economy is not prosperous. The large numbers of people who were protesters and sympathizers may be immobilized, but they are still there. Once we realize our own strength, it is clear that we really can begin to move, to pull our forces back together, to formulate and achieve some of the demands of the growing radical consciousness in America. Perhaps in the proper order organization should come first, then program. But right now we have no significant national organization. We can, however, start moving together on the

issues that profoundly unite us, such as the issue of Vietnam. And to find each other again in the midst of action, to coordinate and extend it, is the beginning and essence of organization. The election provides a challenge and an opportunity.

Our goal should be to make the radical presence a serious independent factor in the electoral process. We should organize as radicals, develop and articulate a radical critique of the politics we confront. We should build loyalty only to radical organization, and undermine loyalty to the Democratic Party. The first condition of radical electoral participation is that we do it on our own terms.

When radicals decide to support a liberal candidate, it should be on a clearly limited basis. We should not merge our forces with his, but try to act as a unit, through independent campaign committees, etc. We should not simply steer people into the campaign but draw people into our independent committees, from inside and outside the regular campaign. We should exercise complete freedom of criticism, taking this opportunity to present a radical viewpoint in a context where people are listening. If the candidate takes a good position on Vietnam, fine, we will reinforce it. But we will also raise our own questions. What about pulling out of the 2000 other military bases that the U.S. maintains all over the world? Whose interests are they there to serve? What about giving assistance to Cuba and Chile? What about distinguishing the U.S. national interest from the interests of U.S. investors abroad?

Radicals should make clear that, whether we support or oppose a liberal candidate, we reject his liberalism. We should lay out specific conditions for our support, demands that we insist on, and we should use our independence to insure that these demands are met. Our ability to force an issue depends on the readiness to reward or to punish, to wield the carrot or the stick. When we do move into opposition, third party campaigns, etc., it will be on the persuasive basis of our rejected demands and the clear value of a credible threat.

Such a campaign this year would be a significant step forward in inde-